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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT)

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SUBJECT: ERBIL RRT: KURDISTAN REGIONAL POLITICS THROUGH THE EYES OF ITS YOUTH

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Students in the Kurdistan Region (KR) uniformly stress that the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) dominate both the political and private spheres of the KR. But their opinions differ on whether these political parties have advanced the democratic process in the KRG. With few exceptions, students are dissatisfied with the current political status quo and seek greater participation in the socio-political development of the KR. END SUMMARY

POLITICAL PARTIES: TRAILBLAZERS OR ROADBLOCKS?

¶2. (U) Since the creation of the modern autonomous region, the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) have held heretofore unchallenged dominance of the political sphere in the Kurdistan Region (KR). Over the course of history, their influence over the private sector, civil society, and media has also grown. Students say that political party connections are now more essential than actual qualifications when applying for jobs in either the public or private sector. But while students agree on the power of political parties, their opinions vary greatly on the degree to which political parties represent the interests of their constituencies and have advanced the democratic process. Regional Reconstruction Team Officer (RRTOff) met with small groups of students and the youth leagues of the three largest political parties in the KR to ascertain their views on the roles that political parties play in KR politics.

¶3. (U) During interviews with RRTOff, students' opinions on political parties' effectiveness in serving the interests of the people seemed to depend on students' proximity to party decision-makers and the degree to which their personal interests were gratified by party membership. Those who were leaders of political party youth leagues, very much the "inner circle," obviously identified most strongly with party ideology. Students in the Dohuk and Sulaimaniyah branches of youth leagues of the two dominant political parties, the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), offered rousing support for their respective parent parties and gratitude for all that the party founders had "sacrificed on behalf of the people of Kurdistan." They were also the most forgiving of the degree to which the two parties have monopolized the political debate since the creation of the modern Kurdistan Region. "Neither party is perfect," said a member of the KDP Youth League in Dohuk, "but for now, we two are better than the others."

¶4. (U) Members of the youth league of the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) were equally supportive of their parent party. However, they were extremely critical of dominant party control of all political and socio-economic developments in the Kurdistan Region. They accused those parties of closing the larger political process to anyone not affiliated with the KDP or PUK and using any means necessary to prevent the development of a proper opposition party within the government. (Note: The KIU is the third largest political party in the KR, and received seven percent of the Kurdish vote in 2005. Although KIU influence is slowly growing, it does not constitute a threat to either of the two major parties.)

¶15. (U) Political party youth leagues are also extremely vocal on the issue of a future independent Kurdistan. Said a 23-year-old member of the KDP Youth League in Dohuk of the Iraqi federal system, "This union is a compulsory marriage and we want a divorce!" Some Q "This union is a compulsory marriage and we want a divorce!" Some went so far as to suggest that those who call for additional steps toward decentralization (such as a plethora of strong political parties rather than the current two-party monopoly) are insensitive to the fact that the Kurds must remain unified if they will ever be able to secure an independent Kurdistan. Said another member of the KDP Youth League, "The most important goal is to be recognized as an independent nation. Once we are independent, we will be able to have more parties. But for now, we must unify against external threats instead of fighting against one another."

¶16. (U) The most critical students were those either not affiliated with political parties or affiliated in name only as a sort of "insurance policy." The variance in their opinions was reflected in the responses of the different groups to similar questions. Unaffiliated students cited unemployment, the lack of essential services and corruption as the issues of greatest significance, while political party youth league students replied Article 140 implementation, Kurdish independence and the upcoming legislative elections. (Note: Responses from the unaffiliated group track popular opinion more closely. During a recent youth-focused radio program on which RRTOff is a regular guest, 90% of callers' questions and comments were about fears of unemployment. End Note) Many youth admitted that they were members of political parties not because of ideological affinity, but rather to bolster their chances of financial security.

¶17. (U) However, even within the "inner circle," there are signs of discontent. Some members of PUK Youth League in Sulaimaniyah expressed frustration with the political parties' obstructionism in fostering political and economic development in the KR. "The

parties are run by old revolutionaries with tribal mentalities." said one youth league member. Still another said, "The role of the youth league is marginalized. If we have ideas for projects and our leaders disagree, the project goes nowhere." Some members of the KIU Youth League were also frustrated. "Civil society organizations and the media are important for exposing problems in society, but here, neither are free from political party domination."

¶18. (U) For many, dissatisfaction with all the political parties' failure to place the interests of the common people over their own personal gain has led to a general malaise with the political process. "We do not believe in political parties anymore," said a fourth-year Information Technology student at the University of Sulaimaniyah. "The parties have been unable to carry the interests of the youth into the government." Said one second-year biology major at the University of Dohuk, "The government exists to serve the political parties. The political parties exist to serve themselves." Said another Engineering student at the University of Sulaimaniyah, "The political parties do not really care for the problems and concerns of youth. The parties are struggling to maintain their influence in society and we are caught in the middle. Youth are used as tools in the party." Others believe that vested interests in the KRG are actively working against democratization and are incapable of moving democracy any further, since to do so would jeopardize the influence that politicians' have over socio-economic and political issues. (Note: RRT local staff persons remark that previously, students were much more receptive of political party ideology. RRT local staff believe that the change reflects the degree to which elected KRG officials have failed to keep campaign promises. End Note)

¶19. (U) COMMENT: Conversations at universities in Kurdistan can sound very similar to those at schools in developed countries. Youth here, like elsewhere, are eager to participate in a modern life that suits a youthful perspective, and take their place in society. Recent changes in the Kurdistan Region indicate that students may soon have a greater chance to do so. On February 11, the Kurdistan National Assembly lowered the minimum age of parliamentary officials from 30 to 25 and there is already competition for those seats. Whether these young people will be able to affect change from within the system remains to be seen. END

COMMENT

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